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"Well it depends on what you'd call play": Parent perspectives on play in Queensland's Preparatory Year.

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Abstract

In the context of recent education reform, Queensland's Preparatory Year (Prep) is undergoing a period of significant change. The framing of Prep under a new national curriculum reflects a shift from its play-based roots to a formalised subject-based approach. This shift coincides with suggestions that parents may favour more formalised approaches to teaching and learning in the early years. This paper reports on two studies in which parents were interviewed about their views of play in Prep. Data were analysed thematically, with a focus on themes used by parents to talk about play. While parents broadly valued play, the findings suggest that parent participation greatly influenced their acceptance of play-based learning in the formal learning context of Prep. The findings raise implications for educators in fostering strong parent-teacher partnerships in order to facilitate improved parental understanding and support of play in early childhood programs.

Key words: Preparatory Year, Prep, Queensland, play, parents, partnership, early years, curriculum, interviews, thematic analysis

Word count: 6031 words

“Well it depends on what you’d call play”: Parent perspectives on play in Queensland’s Preparatory Year

Introduction

The Preparatory Year (Prep) is the first year of primary schooling in Queensland. When introduced in 2007, this full-time non-compulsory program and its curriculum and pedagogy framework, the *Early Years Curriculum Guidelines (EYCG)*, reflected a child-centred model of early childhood education valuing play-based, hands-on and child responsive learning (Hard & O’Gorman, 2007). The education landscape changed significantly in Queensland with the introduction of a standardised, national *Australian Curriculum* in 2012 (Petriwskyj, Turunen, & O’Gorman, 2013). As part of the phased introduction of *Australian Curriculum* in Queensland, which is intended to be completed in 2016, Prep’s *EYCG* is being phased-out (Queensland Studies Authority (QSA), 2011, 2012).

Since Thorpe et al.’s (2005) report on the 2003 Prep trial, only a handful of studies have investigated stakeholder views of Prep. No published research has specifically considered stakeholder views on play in Prep since the trial. In the context of the curriculum shifts in early childhood education in Queensland, current stakeholder expectations and experiences of Prep as a play-based, non-compulsory program are unclear.

This paper presents findings from two studies that investigated parent views of play in Queensland Prep. In this paper, we discuss how play has become a contested concept in early childhood education, and explore some specific challenges that are faced in Queensland Prep. Drawing on parents’ perspectives, we suggest that strong parent-teacher partnerships can support the enactment and promotion of play pedagogies in early years’ settings.

Background to the studies

Queensland Prep

The current non-compulsory Queensland Prep program was first introduced in 2007 following its trial in 64 sites across Queensland in 2003. The intention of the program

was to provide all Queensland children with “better preparation before they enter school” (The State of Queensland, 2002, p. 7) and to “enhance thinking skills, school performance and social adjustment” (The State of Queensland, 2002, p. 14). Children commencing Prep are typically aged between four and a half and five and a half years, and they attend five days a week.

The *EYCG* (QSA, 2006), a curriculum and pedagogy framework developed specifically for Prep, identifies play as one of five contexts for learning and development. Reflecting research findings in early years’ settings in the UK (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004), the *EYCG* acknowledges the important role of adults in supporting and facilitating play-based learning with children (QSA, 2006). Research pointing to optimised learning for children where strong parent-teacher partnerships exist emphasises the importance of parents’ continued involvement in their children’s school-based education (Berger, 2008; Comer & Ben-Avie, 2010; Tayler, 2006). Thus, the *EYCG* also acknowledges the relationship between children’s learning at home and at school, and the significance of collaborative partnerships between parents and teachers as key to children’s success (QSA, 2006).

In 2012, Prep in Queensland was at the centre of significant education reform with the roll-out of the *Australian Curriculum* (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, n.d.). Prep’s position shifted from an early years’ program with its own separate, play-based curriculum and pedagogy framework to its current status as the first year of “formal” schooling in Queensland (Minister for Education, Training and Employment, 2013, p. 958) with a focus on school attendance, academic learning outcomes, and formalised assessment and reporting (Department of Education, Training and Employment, 2011).

Tensions since the introduction of the *Australian Curriculum* include the exclusion of students from curriculum construction, with concerns raised that educational agendas such as social justice and student agency may be sidelined (Ditchburn, 2012a, 2012b; Ewing, 2012). Further, the separation of subjects in the *Australian Curriculum* into “discrete academic disciplines” (Ewing, 2012, p. 102) represents a shift away from the “broadly based... balanced... integrated program” (QSA, 2006, p. 9) provided by Prep’s

EYCG. While there is not necessarily an incongruence between standardised academic curricula and play pedagogies in achieving successful outcomes for children in the early years (Petriwskyj et al., 2013), Australian commentators note a push away from play pedagogies towards more formalised, outcomes-focused learning strategies (Grieshaber, 2010; Hard & O’Gorman, 2007). Of particular relevance to Prep is the suggestion that pre-eminence of literacy and numeracy outcomes, together with the pedagogic silence of the *Australian Curriculum*, may result in formalised pedagogies for young children (Luke, 2010; Petriwskyj et al., 2013).

Play in early education settings

Significant attention is given to the topic of play in early childhood education. While commonalities exist in descriptions of play, its context dependence and variance means that there is no *one* definition of play (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). This paper does not attempt to construct a definition of play but rather consider how play might be viewed by parents in early childhood settings.

A diversity of perspectives exists regarding the facilitation of different approaches to play. Through an early childhood education lens, play is valued conceptually and pedagogically (Björk-Willén & Cromdal, 2009; Fler, 2013). Despite evidence that play can be understood as serious (Cobb-Moore, Danby, & Farrell, 2005; Danby, 2005) and educational (Björk-Willén & Cromdal, 2009; Brooker & Edwards, 2010), the concept of play in education settings, more broadly, is contested (Hyvönen, 2011). While recognised as an important pursuit in non-compulsory education settings, play is not always endorsed in more formal settings (Einarsdóttir, 2006; Fler, 2013; Hard & O’Gorman, 2007) where it is often positioned by adults as a means to an end, such as a reward for the completion of work or as a holding task (Moss & Petrie, 2002). The positioning of play in this way suggests that it can be treated as separate to, and less important than, learning (Anning, 2010; Moyles, 2010; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008).

In early childhood settings, play traditionally has been viewed as a child-initiated and directed activity (Fisher, 2010; O’Gorman & Ailwood, 2012; Wood & Attfield, 2005). While contemporary research (Sylva et al., 2004; Thorpe et al., 2005) emphasises the

important role of adults in supporting and guiding children's learning through play, tensions borne out of differing educational beliefs, practices and orientations can result in ambiguity as to when and how teachers should involve themselves in play (Dockett, 2010; Fler, 2013; Wood, 2010). Suggestions that many teachers may themselves view play and learning as dichotomous pursuits (Hyvönen, 2011) further emphasise the ambiguous nature of play in education contexts.

Differences in how play is positioned in Australian state and national curriculum frameworks may further shape stakeholder views of play. While research suggests that educators and parents view play as positive, valuable and creative, the findings also highlight that they consider it to be a less serious endeavour than more formalised practices such as teacher-directed learning (Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, & Gryfe, 2008; O'Gorman & Ailwood, 2012; Sherwood & Reifel, 2010). In South Australia, teachers' concerns regarding heightened expectations related to curriculum and learning outcomes, and formalised assessment and reporting, were identified as barriers to play pedagogy in the early years (Dockett, 2010). With Prep positioned as both non-compulsory *and* the first year of formal schooling in Queensland, there is evidence to suggest that tensions are already emerging amongst stakeholders as to the role and value of play in Prep. In particular, Queensland Prep teachers highlight the challenges they experience when trying to substantiate children's learning through play to other adult stakeholders (O'Gorman & Hard, 2013). A belief amongst teachers that parents are unsupportive of play, favouring instead formalised literacy and numeracy activities, has also been identified as a barrier to play in Australian early years' settings (Dockett, 2010; Olsen & Sumsion, 2000).

A perceived endorsement by the wider community of traditionally valued knowledge and skills, such as literacy and numeracy, is evident in sustained commentary from the Australian media. In particular, assertions regarding Queensland children's poor performance in the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) relative to other states and territories have resulted in a concerted focus on literacy and numeracy outcomes (Caldwell & Chilcott, 2012; Chilcott & Vonnnow, 2012; Chilcott, 2011, 2013; Morton, 2013) and a push-down of formalised curriculum in early childhood settings (Hard & O'Gorman, 2007).

In light of such commentary and perceived parent attitudes to play in education settings, this paper considers how parents view play in the context of early years' settings, such as Prep.

The studies

This paper presents the findings from two studies in which parents were interviewed to investigate their views on play in Prep and its role in their child's development. The rationale for these studies lies in the paucity of research on stakeholder views in the context of Prep. Since Thorpe et al.'s (2005) *Preparing for School trial*, only a handful of studies have investigated stakeholder views in Prep. These studies investigated parent and teacher views on the introduction of Prep (O'Gorman, 2007; Walker et al., 2012), Prep teacher views on leadership (O'Gorman & Hard, 2013), Prep teacher views on school readiness (Noel, 2010), and teacher aide views on the impact of the *Australian Curriculum* in Prep (Sonter, 2013). While O'Gorman and Ailwood (2012) reported on parent views of play in Prep, their data were gathered independently of, but at the same time as, the trial of the Prep program in 2003, some years before Prep's universal rollout in Queensland in 2007.

Study 1

In Study 1, parents of children enrolled in Prep in 2012 were interviewed. They were recruited via an advertisement posted on a Queensland University of Technology (QUT) classifieds email list. The parents (7 mothers and 1 father) had children who attended state and independent schools in Brisbane. The participants were unknown to the researcher prior to the interviews taking place. Conducted in office spaces on QUT campuses, interviews were semi-structured in format, quite formal in approach, and lasted from 30 minutes to two hours.

Study 2

Study 2 was an ethnographic study in a Prep classroom in Brisbane in 2014. The Prep classroom had been identified as a potential research site by a member of the research team who had previously been a teaching colleague of the classroom teacher. Data consisted of semi-structured parent, teacher and child interviews, and classroom

observations. Specifically, it is data from interviews with six mothers in Study 2 that are presented in this paper.

The participants were known to the researcher by the time they were interviewed through the course of informal conversations in and around the classroom. All but one of the interviews took place in quiet spots in the school grounds. The other interview took place over the phone. Unlike the more formal interview environment in Study 1, interviews in Study 2 had all of the distractions normally associated with a school environment. These included school bells ringing, and children and adults passing by, stopping to say hello. Younger siblings also were present for a number of the interviews. Because of the relationships that had developed between the researcher and the participants, the interviews took a more informal, conversational format and lasted up to 45 minutes.

Studies 1 and 2 have ethical approval from QUT (Study 1: 1200000105; Study 2: 1400000238) and Education Queensland (Study 2: 550/27/1454). Parents in each study provided written consent and pseudonyms are used to de-identify participants.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were used in both studies to investigate parent views of play in Queensland Prep. A list of questions guided the interviews. These included:

- How do you define play?
- Does your child play in Prep?
- Does play have positive benefits for your child?
- Does play have negative consequences for your child?
- What place do you think play has in a Prep classroom?

The interviews in both studies were audio recorded and transcribed in full to provide as thorough as possible an account (Roulston, DeMarrais, & Lewis, 2003). The transcripts were emailed to the participants for member checking and to provide participants with opportunities to ask questions or provide feedback on their interview or other aspects of the study.

The process of interviewing with two different groups of participants (i.e. those known and unknown to the researcher), in different settings, at different points emphasised how the research interview is one that is collaboratively produced by the participants and the researcher (Roulston, 2010). While the focus of the interviews in both studies centred-around parent views of play in Prep, the interviews differed in the different physical locations in which they took place and in the nature of the relationships between the researcher and interviewees. Particularly evident in Study 2 were parents who asked the researcher questions and discussed matters regarding their families and personal circumstances that were outside the scope of the study. The researcher spoke with some parents about her own personal experiences in the classroom, and about her own children in the context of Prep. These interactions highlight that, while the content of interviews is important, the context of the interview is an important consideration in the analysis of interview data (Roulston et al., 2003).

Data analysis

Analysis of data from Study 1 was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) *Phases of Thematic Analysis*. This approach involved reading and re-reading interview transcripts a number of times to understand the data as a whole. Codes were identified and aggregated to form main themes and sub-themes. The same process guided the interview data analysis in Study 2. In keeping with the ethnographic design of Study 2, particular consideration was given to themes in the data derived from the language used by the participants, referred to in ethnography as emic themes (Wolcott, 2008). The final phase involved examining the data from both studies to note similarities and differences between the two, and to ask "what stands out?" (Roulston, 2010, p. 200), and these are presented below.

Study 1: The findings

There were three key findings from Study 1 regarding parent views of play in Prep:

1. Play is understood from an adult perspective

Parents in Study 1 understood Prep to be a "play-based" program, which led to an assumption for many that play activities were present in Prep. Some parents however, expressed concerns that play was not evident in Prep. Most parents commented that

they spent little time in their child's classroom and had not directly witnessed their child playing there. Parents typically described play in the context of resource-based, teacher-directed playful activities, and a number made reference to designated "corners" and displays in the room. For example:

It's free... it's not very prescribed in that they've got a lot of say over what they do. So they get a picture of a bunny but then they can do whatever they want with it. They can colour it in or stick things on it or whatever so it's quite up to them how they deal with that and they have a lot of fun. (Jade S1)

2. Play is problematic in the context of formal learning outcomes

Parents in Study 1 broadly indicated that they valued play as an appropriate context for learning, describing it as "fun" and a way to "engage" young children in learning. In particular, parents suggested that, when playing, children did not realise they were learning:

...it might still have a learning objective but they might not know it so they don't think they're learning something. They just think they're having fun. (Lee S1)

Tensions arose when play was considered in the formal context of Prep and learning outcomes. Some parents expressed concern that too much play might be detrimental to learning. One parent suggested that it would render Prep akin to "day care".

In terms of the school environment I guess if it was all free play where does the learning happen? If it's just play then yeah... well I would be disappointed. (Lisa S1)

Let's say... all you did was just activities... I mean so long as the outcomes are met there is no problem in doing so. But let's say you're meeting all these other outcomes...but, you know, we're leaving part of the maths behind or... letting something else slide a bit... if we're not meeting other outcomes... the kids will love you for it...you've played all semester and they've learned some stuff but they haven't learned everything. (Alex S1)

3. The Prep teacher's role is to direct play to ensure that learning outcomes are met

Most parents in Study 1 suggested that, for learning to occur, play should be directed by the teacher. For these parents, free play (i.e. child-directed play) was not an activity that was supported within the classroom. Free play was seen as largely purposeless, where children would “wander off” and “never concentrate”. There were suggestions that it would be “incredibly frustrating” for the teacher and lead to “anarchy” in the classroom:

...in a classroom of 25 kids it's got to be directed and they do their undirected play outside at break... I don't see any point in undirected play within classroom teaching hours. (Kim S1)

...at this age if they were told to lead their own activities they would be only very loosely associated with what they're meant to be learning. (Jade S1)

One parent described her perspective on the role of the teacher in directing play and learning:

... I'm thinking [Teacher] would break them down into their designated group and maybe orange group you can have a play in home corner and then they get ten minutes in there and maybe they swap around or something or maybe they get to choose. Okay, there's these five things that you get to do. So you can play in home corner. You can colour in. (Lee S1)

With the exception of one parent who described how her child's Prep teacher had scaffolded children's learning in a child-initiated, play-based episode, notions of “shared-sustained thinking” (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden, & Bell, 2002, p.8) were largely absent from parents' interpretations of the teacher's role in play. For many parents, the teacher's age or character was a key determinant of their ability or desire to participate in play; teachers would be more likely to participate in play if they were “young” and “energetic” rather than “old” and “tired”. Whether a teacher had children also was seen as having an impact on whether or not they would participate in children's play.

Study 2: The findings

The findings from Study 2 are organised under three headings, in line with those used for Study 1.

1. Play is understood from a child's perspective

The parents in Study 2 spent regular and significant periods of time in their child's classroom in the morning after school drop-off, volunteering in the classroom, and networking with other parents and the wider school community. As was the case in Study 1, the parents in Study 2 valued play as an important aspect of children's learning. A clear distinction between the two studies, however, is that parents in Study 2 considered play from a child's perspective rather than from an adult perspective:

They [children] learn by doing. They learn by experiencing. They learn by, you know, playing with other children. (Sue S2)

...from what I understand it [play] is part of how... the children learn. (Eva S2)

Parents described play as an active process. Rather than focusing on resources or artefacts, parents spoke of what *their* child *did* during play. Parents particularly talked about their child's play in the context of collaboration with other children and the involvement of teachers. Parents also described learning in play:

...he has to show me what he's built during indoor play... they've built some kind of space craft that he shows to me and there's always a note on the space craft saying the names of the children and "stop, this is..." whatever it is and you can see that [Teacher] has encouraged them to phonetically spell it how they think it should be spelled. (Louise S2)

...you see all this stuff around the classroom from inside play... the reef display that they're doing at the moment and they come home with creations that they've made. They did the Prep movie night...that was wonderful. So [Teacher] took an extension of whatever the curriculum was and tailored it to the interest of all the children. (Vicky S2)

2. Play and learning are inter-connected

In identifying learning in their child's play, parents talked about play and learning as being inter-connected rather than as separate and distinct, as described by parents in Study 1.

...the kids highly value inside play... I guess because it turns their learning space into not just a learning space but a fun, like, play environment. (Vicky S2)

it [learning] needs to be fun and purposeful and have that meaning to it. (Sue S2)

3. The Prep teacher's role is to advocate for play and to develop strong parent-teacher partnerships

The classroom setting in Study 2 had a strong play-based agenda. The teacher described how she "passionately believe[s] in play inside the classroom". In positioning play as a context for learning in Prep, the teacher commented on the need to "advocate very strongly" on behalf of play and appropriate early years' pedagogies with teaching colleagues, school leaders and policy makers.

While many parents expressed surprise at the level of play in the classroom, it was evident that they accepted the teacher's play-based agenda and were grateful that she was their child's teacher:

...we've been really impressed with [Teacher]... we've just been so pleased that she's the teacher and she's done such a great job. (Louise S2)

Parents also recognised the teacher as an advocate for play in Prep:

...we've been really lucky...school is a really great place to actually be... [Teacher] will stick up and stand for something. (Vicky S2)

...in talking with [Teacher] it's [play] not something that is a designated part of what they do. Like they don't have to do it and I know that it's something

that they've worked hard to make time and space for ...I'm very grateful for that. (Barbara S2)

There was a strong sense of community between the parents and the teacher, and between families outside the classroom context. Parents described how the teacher advocated, and laid the foundations, for partnership at the beginning of the year. Parents spoke about the impact that strong parent-teacher partnerships had on their family's relationships within the school community:

[Teacher] made a really good point that...my husband and I volunteer...we've made a real point of getting quite involved... she said that's helped him [child] feel quite settled.... said you'll experience a whole new community and you'll make new friendships and it's a new path and I remember thinking "ah whatever" ... but I love it. Oh my God, I'm like "shame we didn't start school years ago". (Vicky S2)

...you go into a new group of people and there are those normal barriers to start getting to know someone and making new relationships and friends. She [Teacher] removed a lot of them for us... It's been so good to make these new friendships and for the families to be able to spend time together... and I've benefited as well from the time that I've had in the classroom. I've loved being a part of it... [Teacher] said it's important for the kids to see their parents in the classroom so that they know that the parents think that's it important too... [Teacher] is such a great person. I like seeing how she does things as an individual, not just with the kids but even how she wrangles the parents and, you know, the way that she gets people to do things. (Barbara S2).

Discussion

The findings demonstrate different ways in which play in Prep is interpreted by parents. In particular, the findings from Study 2 highlight the positive outcomes of parent engagement and strong parent-teacher partnerships in providing parents with an alternate lens through which to view play, resulting in deeper understandings of their child's early learning experiences. While not representative of all parents in

Queensland, the findings of these two studies provoke theoretical questions about the role of play in Prep, the role of teachers in advocating for play, and the significance of strong parent-teacher partnerships.

The parents in Study 2 were in a position to spend significant time in their child's class. Not all parents would have the time or resources to be so involved. It is possible that parents in Study 1 were restricted in their involvement in their child's classroom due to work or other commitments. The impact of school culture on parent-teacher partnerships was evident in Study 1 with one parent commenting that she did not feel welcome there. As such, schools have an important role to play in fostering parent involvement (Ashton et al., 2008; Berthelsen & Walker, 2008; Skouteris, Watson, & Lum, 2012). More creative strategies, such as those suggested by the *Australian Family-School Partnerships Framework* (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008), may facilitate schools reaching out to *all* parents, rather than those who are readily accessible. The findings from Study 2 highlight that strong parent-school partnerships can imbue parents with a sense of efficacy and agency in their child's school-based learning that translates into parental support and involvement in the classroom environment.

Parental involvement provides opportunities for parents to understand firsthand the programs their children attend. Understanding the role of play in young children's learning, and the role of the teacher in play, is heightened by strong parent-teacher partnerships and teacher advocacy. The findings suggest that, where teachers advocate for play in the context of strong parent-teacher partnerships, it is possible for play pedagogies to be enacted and promoted. Such contexts may also provide opportunities for parents themselves to advocate for play, and in turn strengthen the alliance between schools and families in the education of young children.

Conclusion

An investigation of how parents interpret play and its relevance in Prep highlights that their perspectives are multifaceted and, in some instances, incongruous. The majority of parents in both studies viewed play an appropriate learning strategy for young children. However, many (particularly those in Study 1) struggled to balance their views of play

more broadly with those of play in the formal learning context of Prep, evidencing Youngquist and Pataray-Ching's (2004) positioning of play as problematic in the context of formal education settings.

The findings highlight the significance of collaborative parent-teacher partnerships that are underpinned by shared-decision making, active participation and parental involvement fostered by teachers and schools. Parent-teacher partnerships, which sit within the scope of curricula and regulatory policy, are key to children's success at school. Through collaborative engagement in their children's education, parents are more likely to have a greater understanding of the early childhood programs their children attend resulting in stakeholders better facilitating the education of young children. Ongoing engagement and debate amongst all stakeholders that considers the variation of understandings of play and its place in early childhood settings is a vital challenge as we reinterpret the relevance of play in shifting early childhood contexts.

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